

*Approximate boundaries:*  
**N**-W. Hampton Ave; **S**-W. Capitol Dr;  
**E**-W. Fond Du Lac Ave; **W**-N. 76<sup>th</sup> St.  
(partial)-Wisconsin Hwy 175

# NORTHWEST SIDE *Capitol Heights*

## NEIGHBORHOOD DESCRIPTION

Capitol Heights is a densely populated neighborhood with a variety of housing styles, including Cape Cods, colonials, ranch, and some Tudor style houses built in the 1920s and 1930s. The streets follow a rectangular grid pattern with the exception of the two streets that define the east and west boundaries of the neighborhood. Both West Appleton and West Fond du Lac Avenues run at diagonals from Hampton Avenue to Capitol Drive.

The main commercial districts are along West Capitol Drive, West Fond du Lac Avenue, and West Appleton Avenue. A large section of the southeast corner of the neighborhood is occupied by the Midtown Center, a large shopping mall.

Capitol Heights is mainly flat, interspersed with rolling hills. There is no public green space except for the play field north of John Marshall High School. See neighborhood photos below.

## HISTORY

Capitol Heights got its name from Capitol Drive, the neighborhood's southern border. Known as Lake Street prior to 1929, it was renamed when the City of Milwaukee was trying to eliminate duplicate names. Because Wisconsin's capitol—Madison—is due west of the thoroughfare, the City changed Lake Street to Capitol Drive.

### Early populations

The area that today is the Capitol Heights neighborhood was once the northern tip of the unincorporated, rural Town of Wauwatosa. According to an 1855 map, the boundaries of the Town of Wauwatosa were Greenfield to the south, Hampton to the north, 27<sup>th</sup> Street to the east, and 127<sup>th</sup> Street to the west. Most of the Town of Wauwatosa settlers were migrants from its eastern neighbor, Milwaukee, and most of these were Germans. The City of Milwaukee would later annex much of the Town of Wauwatosa. By the middle of the 1920s, the Capitol Heights area was in Milwaukee.

The Capitol Heights area had originally shared its northern border with Granville Township. Granville—that also later consolidated much of its area with Milwaukee—had attracted several waves of German immigrants between the mid-1800s and early 1900s. These included a wave of Pennsylvania “Dutch” (actually Germans) who arrived from Telford, Pennsylvania in the 1840s, and German Russians who had left Germany for Russia's Volga River and Black Sea areas in the late 1700s and later immigrated to America and Wisconsin between 1910 and 1920. Parts of this German population would spill over to the Capitol Heights area in later generations.

By 1940, there were sparse settlements of residents on the streets within the Capitol Heights boundaries. Nearly all the businesses and residences were along West Fond du Lac Avenue. Fewer than 70 residences were on the other blocks, and most of these were on North 60<sup>th</sup> and North 65<sup>th</sup> Streets. Nearly all of the residents had German-sounding names. An exception is the following.



Today's neighborhood Houses at 61<sup>st</sup> & Marion

## Capitol Heights random family

*Name selected randomly from the 1940 City Directory in the Capitol Heights area  
(other information found in census records)*

### The Mesenbours

The Mesenbours were one of the earliest families to settle in today's Capitol Heights' neighborhood. They moved to the corner of Capitol and 63rd Street before 1930. For at least a decade they had no neighbors near them.

John J. Mesenbourg was born in 1882, the son of Luxembourger immigrants. In 1904, he married Catherine Caspary, b. 1883, the daughter of a father born in Germany and a mother born in Wisconsin. Catherine was living on Vliet Street on the Near North Side with her parents and working as a milliner just prior to her marriage. Upon marriage, the couple rented a flat in Catherine's parents' home and remained there until they were apparently able to afford their own home in the Capitol Heights area. While living on Vliet, the couple had children Regina, Anthony, Roland, John P, and Catherine. Over two-thirds of Luxembourgers have historically been Catholic as well as over half of the German Americans in Milwaukee, hence it is likely that this family was Catholic.

Like many families of the times, the Mesenbours tended to their parents as well as their children. While living in Capitol Heights, they took in Catherine's widowed mother—also named Catherine—and John J.'s widowed father—also named John. John J. worked as a carpenter for one of Milwaukee's breweries and apparently was able to hold his job through the early years of the Great Depression. Unfortunately he died in the 1930s at a relatively young age.

But the Mesenbours continued to care for each other. By 1940 the house on 63rd Street had new occupants. Catherine, now widowed, remained with her grown and working children, Regina and Roland. In addition, daughter Catherine, and her growing family--husband George Westenhausen and three children--were also living in the home. Together they were providing for themselves and mother/grandmother Catherine. No information was found on how long Catherine lived.

### *The importance of Fond du Lac Avenue and Capitol Drive*

Early on, Fond du Lac Avenue became the major business corridor in the Capitol Heights' neighborhood. Originally a plank road, it led to the city of Fond du Lac at the south end of Lake Winnebago. The French phrase meant "bottom of the lake," a reference to the city's location. The following chart lists the businesses that were on Capitol Drive within the Capitol Heights boundaries in 1940. See summary and notes below.

<i>Addresses on W. Capitol Drive in 1940</i>	<i>Businesses and organizations from <u>Milwaukee City Directory</u></i>
5508	Paul F. Haagen Market Gardener
5600	Edward Petzold Wholesale Florist

<i>Addresses on W. Capitol Drive in 1940</i>	<i>Businesses and organizations from <u>Milwaukee City Directory</u></i>
5832	August A. Janke Market Gardener
6408	Richard Lanyon Landscape Gardener
6700	Fairway Driving Range
7308	Henry Schraml Barbeque
7322	Capitol Drive Fruit Market
7400	Kleinmann's Service Filling Station
NE corner N. 76th and Capitol	Golden Guernsey Milk Jug

**Notes from census and other records:**

- The businesses on Capitol Drive within Capitol Heights neighborhood (north side of the street) reflect the rural environment of the area in 1940, dominated by food and flower production.
- As in almost all Milwaukee neighborhoods prior to 1970, the business owners were immigrants or children of immigrants, and never attended high school.
- Paul F. Haagen, the truck gardener, was the son of German immigrants from Wauwatosa. Paul grew up on the family farm in Wauwatosa and completed the 7th grade in school.
- Edward Petzold ("Eddie"), the wholesale florist, also was the son of German immigrants living in Wauwatosa and also completed the 7th grade in school.
- August A. Janke, the other truck gardener, wore many hats. A German immigrant, he supplemented his gardening at various times with shoemaking, factory work, and brick laying. He'd completed the 6th grade in school.
- Richard Lanyon, the landscape gardener, was born in England. He completed the 8th grade in school.
- Henry Schraml, the proprietor of the barbeque place, was born in Germany. His wife worked as a cleaning lady and was born in Austria. The couple and son Henry Jr. lived on W. McKinley. While Henry Sr. and Rose only went to the 8th grade in school, son Henry Jr. was in his second year in high school in 1940.
- The owner of Kleinmann's Service, appears to have been Peter Kleinmann. A son of German immigrants, Peter had completed the 8th grade in school

Milwaukee's growing Northwest Side attracted its own newspapers. One of these was *The Northwest News*, published by Ed Bristol Advertising, with offices on 76th and Hampton Avenue. Circulation covered the Capitol Heights neighborhood. The editor of the newspaper was Manny Meyers, the one-time campaign consultant of Mayor Frank Zeidler. The biweekly newspaper operated between 1961 and 1966, with at least one brief reincarnation.

### *Population changes*

During these years, people of color began to migrate to Milwaukee's Northwest Side. African Americans arrived for two reasons: (1) available industrial jobs on the Northwest Side and the area that had been Granville, and (2) the need for housing following the leveling of their former central city home known as Bronzeville (see [Halyard Park neighborhood](#) for details). As in most Milwaukee neighborhoods where Germans dominated, the integration was relatively peaceful. Many African Americans were able to obtain family-supporting jobs and purchase homes.

However, just as soon as the black population had settled in large numbers, they were faced with the long deindustrialization movement, beginning in the 1980s. Manufacturing employment in Milwaukee fell 77 percent from its peak in 1963, to the present. What had been a working and middle class area on the Northwest Side was in decline.

### Current populations (as of 2021)

Today, Capitol Heights has just over 5,500 residents. The median household income is slightly over \$43,000 annually, placing the neighborhood in the lower middle income stratum. The largest number of jobs claimed by residents are in the fields of administration, sales, production, and education. The neighborhood has nearly three times the number of people working as health technicians or in farming as the proportions in other Milwaukee neighborhoods. Just under 15 percent of the residents work in non-profit organizations.

Over the decades, most of the Germans left Capitol Heights. Just over 400 people claim German ancestry in the area today. Nearly 8 in 10 residents are African Americans; approximately 1 in 6 are European Americans (most with mixed European ancestry); a little over 1 in 30 are Asians (nearly all Hmong). The rest are Latinos, indigenous Africans, people from the East Indies and Jamaica, and residents of multiple backgrounds.

### INTERESTING FEATURES

- **Midtown Shopping Center** (formerly Capitol Court), at 60th St. and Capitol, with 45 stores, a food court, and 4,600 parking spaces.
- **John Marshall High School**, at 4141 N. 64th, a Milwaukee high school since 1961.
- **Blessed Savior Catholic School South Campus**, at 4059 N. 64th St., helping the neighborhood by involvement in meal programs, and support for Milwaukee Achievers, the Pan African Community Association, and neighborhood watch groups.
- **Pan African Community Association**, at 4063 N. 64th St., a refugee resettlement agency.

## RECURRING NEARBY OUTINGS (Health conditions permitting)

In the following section the website addresses have been eliminated due to technical problems with the various ways different web browsers display PDF files. Website information on these events is available through the book *Milwaukee Area Outings on the Cheap*. See below.

SLEDDING-- INDIGENOUS PEOPLES' PARK			
When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Winter, daytime	Indigenous Peoples' Park, 7301 W. Courtland Ave.	Sledding hills for family and friends.	Free

JULY 4TH CELEBRATION			
When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
July 4th, 9am-12:30pm	Sherman Park, 3000 N. Sherman Blvd.	Parade, Doll Buggy, Bike & Trike, and Coaster judging, games.	Free

FREE FAMILY SWIM—WASHINGTON HS			
When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Tue.'s 6:00-6:55pm females; 7:00-7:55pm males	Washington H.S., 2525 N. Sherman Blvd., enter main gym door on Sherman Blvd.	Indoor swimming with swim caps available for purchase (children 7 and under must be accompanied by adult). 875-6025	Free

These outings are provided courtesy of MECAH Publishing.

## QUOTES FROM RESIDENTS

*If you are a resident in Capitol Heights and wish to make an interesting observation about this neighborhood, please send your quote to [JFLanthropologist@currently.com](mailto:JFLanthropologist@currently.com)*



PHOTOS



Todays neighborhood-  
Houses at 61st & Marion (1)



Todays neighborhood-  
Mid-Town Center



Todays neighborhood-  
Houses at 61st & Marion (2)

Today's neighborhood-  
John Marshall High School



Today's neighborhood-  
Blessed Savior Catholic School  
South Campus



Today's neighborhood-  
Houses at Armitage & N. 65th St.

For more information on Milwaukee neighborhoods, refer to John Gurda's *Milwaukee, City of Neighborhoods* and Jill Florence Lackey's and Rick Petrie's *Germans in Milwaukee: A neighborhood history*.

Do you have great photos of this neighborhood? Are you a resident with an interesting quote about this neighborhood? Do you have recurring outings, additions, corrections, or general comments about this neighborhood? Please email your input to Dr. Jill Florence Lackey at: [jflanthropologist@currently.com](mailto:jflanthropologist@currently.com)



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